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Mirafra erythrocephala Salvadori & Giglioli, 1885, an older name for *Mirafra assamica* *marionae* Baker, 1915

by Carlo G. Violani & Fausto Barbagli

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While examining the zoological writings by Enrico Hillyer Giglioli (1845-1909), we discovered that the taxon *Mirafra erythrocephala* Salvadori & Giglioli, 1885, from Cochinchina, posed an identification problem.

This name is not mentioned by J. L. Peters (in: Mayr & Greenway 1960), while Sharpe (1890) dismissed it as a synonym of *Mirafra assamica*, adding the note "pt. hiem." (=winter plumage). The last mention of *M. erythrocephala* as a valid species was by Salvadori (1915). In the same year, Baker (1915) described *Mirafra assamica marionae* from Ayuthia, Central Thailand. This latter name was also employed by Delacour & Jabouille (1931) for the subspecies of *M. assamica* inhabiting French Indochina.

Mirrafra [sic!] *erythrocephala* was used again by Arrigoni degli Oddi (1924), listing the new taxa named by T. Salvadori; in 1986 *M.*

erythrocephala was listed in the Catalogue of the Bird Collection in Turin Museum (Elter 1986) and, recently, Barbagli & Violani (1996) equated *M. erythrocephala* to *M. assamica erythrocephala*, while reviewing briefly the bird taxa described by Giglioli and Salvadori from the material brought back to Italy by the corvette "Magenta".

In March 1996 we examined the two unsexed syntypes of *M. erythrocephala* Salvadori & Giglioli, collected in Cochinchina, in the Museo Regionale di Scienze Naturali, Turin, Italy (nos. UCC-M328-6090 and UCC-M503-8562, respectively specimens "a" and "b" of the original description). We compared specimen "a" with the types of *M. assamica* Horsfield, 1840 and *M. a. marionae* Baker, 1915, together with an adequate series of skins of these forms, in The Natural History Museum, Tring, U. K. From this we concluded that, based on plumage, the Turin birds agree perfectly with *M. a. marionae*, including specimens from Cochinchina. The measurements (mm) of the Turin birds are: exposed culmen 15, 12.5; wing (flattened) 80, 73; tail 46, 44; tarsus 27, 27 (for "a" and "b" respectively); these fall within measurements of *M. a. marionae* from the Tring collection. As reported by Salvadori & Giglioli (1885), the Turin birds differ from nominate *assamica* in their "slightly smaller size, the ashy colour of the upperparts more intense and purer, the underparts more whitish and showing the pre-pectoral spots more blackish and wider" [transl.]. In addition, *M. erythrocephala* also differs from nominate *assamica* in having "the crown feathers edged with rufous and a reddish superciliary stripe and cheeks" [transl.].

In view of the similarity between the Turin birds and *marionae*, and differences from the other taxon, we believe that *erythrocephala* is a synonym of *marionae*, and we propose the older name of *M. erythrocephala* Salvadori & Giglioli, 1885 for the taxon inhabiting Tenasserim, Thailand (except northern), Southern Annam, Cambodia and Cochinchina. Recently, Alström (1998) gave reasons why this taxon should be given full species status and should not be considered as a subspecies of *assamica*; we agree with his opinion on this point.

The syntypes of *M. erythrocephala* were part of the material gathered during the voyage of the Italian Royal corvette "Magenta" between 1865 and 1868. The naturalists Filippo de Filippi and Enrico H. Giglioli were responsible for the scientific collecting. Only two bushlarks were obtained, on different days and in different localities. From the voyage's account (Giglioli 1876), the "Magenta" called at Saigon from 4 to 11 June 1866, and the scientists gathered zoological material in nearby territory. Among the birds shot near Ba-lua on 10 June there was a "*Mirafra* sp.?"; this was presumably specimen "a" of the original description, whose exact locality and day of capture were not recorded in the printed diagnosis, nor on the bird's label. Giglioli does not mention the capture of the other specimen ("b"), which bears the inscription "Thu Duc" [a village 12 km N of Saigon] and the date June 1866 on its label, but he says that this place was briefly visited on 7 June, when several birds were collected. The two specimens of *Mirafra* arrived at Turin in February 1867, but they were only worked

out scientifically eighteen years later (Salvadori 1915). On 6 January 1885 Salvadori (*in litt.*) wrote from Turin to Giglioli in Florence: "I wish to inform you that among the birds of Cochinchina I have found some novelties: the *Cissa*, a *Mirafra* and perhaps a *Prinia*. It will be convenient to start describing them immediately" [transl.]. The description was read during a meeting of the Accademia delle Scienze di Torino on 11 January 1885 (Barbagli & Violani 1996) by Salvadori and was published in the "Atti" of the same Institution under the authorship of both scientists. However, it is clear that their diagnosis was composed by Salvadori, who presumably compared the syntypes from Cochinchina with the two Himalayan specimens of *M. assamica* from the Solaroli Collection (nos. UCC-E60-4101 and UCC-E60-4102), also owned by Turin Museum (for the Solaroli Collection, see: Passerin d'Entrèves *et al.* 1995).

In the recent revision of the taxonomic status of the *Mirafra assamica* complex, Alström (1998) considers that the name *marionae* is pre-dated by *erythrocephala*, but nevertheless proposes that *marionae* should be conserved, as the other name "does not appear to have been used since it was introduced".

We do not agree with Alström's view, since the name bestowed by Salvadori & Giglioli was in fact used in 1915, 1924, 1986 and 1996 (as mentioned above), and the taxon description is perfectly valid.

It should be also noted that both syntypes of *M. erythrocephala* are in good condition and are available to scientists, being kept in a large museum; their locality and date of collection can be easily traced from documents, as shown above. Finally, we believe that such a choice of *marionae* over the older and valid name *erythrocephala* should be only sanctioned by a proper opinion of the International Commission on Zoological Nomenclature.

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The past status of the herons in Britain

by W. R. P. Bourne

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Britain now supports few species of heron compared to neighbouring countries in N. W. Europe. It seems likely that in the Middle Ages, when the climate was warmer (Reid Henry & Harrison 1988: 17) and there were more wetlands and fewer people, there may have been more. About 1595 Thomas Muffett reported that in addition to the Great Bittern *Botaurus stellaris* and Grey Heron *Ardea cinerea* they included the Black, White and Criel Heronshaws and Mire-dromble (Mullens 1912). An examination of records of that time (Bourne in press) suggests that these may have been the following species:

Black Heron. This was described about 1668 by Sir Thomas Browne (Stevenson & Southwell 1870: 145, Southwell 1902) as "black on both sides the bottom of the neck white gray on the outside spotted all along with black on the inside a black coppe of small feathers some a spanne long, bill poynted and yallowe 3 inches long. Back heron coloured intermixed with long white fethers. The flying fethers black. The brest black and white most black. The legges and feet not green but ordinary dark cork colour". This agrees with the Purple Heron *Ardea purpurea* except that the latter is more rufous. Apparently Browne's specimens, subsequently destroyed during an outbreak of the